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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of 44 Australian and 81 American senior elementary student teachers were compared to determine how their personal attributes, their teacher education programs, and their student teaching experiences influenced their abilities to perform 35 teaching competencies. Comparisons between the two groups revealed that American students had slightly higher perceptions of their abilities to perform competencies relating to personal attributes, catering for individual differences, and knowledge about educational issues. Australian students had significantly higher perceptions of their abilities to perform competencies relating to classroom performance and organization. The reported differences appear to be the result of differences in the nature of the programs, particularly program objectives and content as well as experiences associated with student teaching which were reported to have the highest influence on students' perceptions. The results of this study highlighted the need to examine the content of courses taught in teacher education programs with a view to avoiding the "theoretical rhetoric" and reinforced the importance of the student teaching experience as the most powerful intervention in the teachers' professional preparation. (Authors)

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AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN ELEMENTARY STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF COLLEGE PROGRAMS, STUDENT TEACHING, AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES IN INFLUENCING CERTAIN TEACHING COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of 44 Australian and 81 American senior elementary student teachers were compared to determine how their personal attributes, their teacher education programs, and their student teaching experiences influenced their abilities to perform 35 teaching competencies.

Comparisons between the two groups revealed the American students had slightly higher perceptions of their abilities to perform competencies relating to personal attributes, catering for individual differences, and knowledge about educational issues, while the Australian students had significantly higher perceptions of their abilities to perform competencies relating to classroom performance and organisation.

The reported differences appear to be the result of differences in the nature of the programs, particularly program objectives and content as well as experiences associated with student teaching which were reported to have the highest influence on students' perceptions.

The results of this study highlighted the need to examine the content of courses taught in teacher education programs with a view to avoiding the "theoretical rhetoric" and reinforced the importance of the student teaching experience as the most powerful intervention in the teachers' professional preparation.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of any teacher education program is the preparation and development of competent teachers. Although acceptance of this goal is universal, a chronic issue is how this goal can best be attained. Central to any discussion of the benefits of any program are the clear statements of the purposes which are sought, the strategies used to achieve these purposes, and the specification of how determinations can be made as to whether or not teacher education programs foster the attainment of intended outcomes, or other outcomes judged to be of value.

Howey, Yarger and Joyce (1978) in discussing the duties teachers are expected to perform have suggested "it is impossible for any contemporary teacher education program to equip teachers with all of the necessary skills" (P.X.). Yet by virtue of certification, teachers are expected to be competent in:

> communication; organisation; identification of specific learning problems and helping children overcome them; assessing learning; evaluating programs; building into programs strategies for inculcating basic values such as honesty, respect, patriotism; integrating culturally pluralistic material in the curriculum; performing all of the above with a sensitivity to the rights of 25 to 30 children (Howey, et al, 1978, P.X.).

The need to develop competent teacher education graduates has led educators in the United States and Australia to highlight the insufficient time available for students to obtain their minimum qualifications. Consequently, in both countries there has been energetic debate about increasing the total length of the pre-service programs. The debate has intensified with the publication of

government reports in Australia (Correy, 1980, Auchmuty, 1980, Asche, 1980) which stressed that additional time is needed to adequately treat the various elements of a program and that the general standard of education is now higher and as educated representatives of adult society, teachers should have an appropriate level of education. Moreover since there has been a considerable increase in the complexity of teaching duties teachers therefore require sufficient knowledge to select, adapt, or modify materials and strategies to suit local conditions and the needs of the pupils.

Despite cogent arguments to increase the length of pre-service programs very little research evidence can be found to support the proposed increases. Indeed, Williamson (1977) reported that students were disillutioned with the value of teacher education courses due in part to excessive emphasis upon theoretical rhetoric and the absence of actual experience with pupils in school. Despite such criticism the value of the student teaching experience remains unquestioned (Howey, et al, 1978, Turney, 1982).

The student teaching experiences, the college program, and the personal attributes of the students blend in some fashion to produce a qualified and effective teacher. Many authors have suggested that the professional development of student teachers is largely influenced by their experiences at college and in the school setting. But little evidence can be found to describe the contribution of the college program to the development of the personal qualities of the students, or how these qualities impact on the design and delivery of teacher education programs.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to compare American and Australian senior elementary student teachers' perceptions of the role of personal attributes, teacher education programs, and student teaching experiences in influencing their abilities to perform 35 teaching competencies. The interaction between these variables governs how much benefit student teachers obtain from their overall preparation for teaching.

The use of student teachers' perceptions was a convenient strategy for making comparisons between programs in different cultures and varying in length from three to four years. This approach may create doubt about the validity of the conclusions because there could be a discrepancy between actual and reported perceptions of students surveyed. Consideration was given to obtaining objective and consistent measures of students' actual abilities instead of reported perceptions of their abilities. This included the use of grades for course work and student teaching. However, this approach may have raised more doubts about the validity of the study because of differences in orientation and philosophy within the two institutions. For example, in the American institution students are more likely to receive an "A" grade. Very little attempts are made to standardise grades within courses or within a program. Even for student teaching an "A" grade indicates satisfactory progress. By contrast grades in the Australian institution reflect some attempts to obtain a "normal" distribution within any given group. Indeed, College Policy for student teaching promotes the awarding of a given percentage of "A", "B", and "C" grades so that the top 10% of students receive "A" grades while the majority of students who demonstrate satisfactory performance receive "C" grades.

Despite difficulties associated with using student teachers' perceptions, it can be argued that social psychology, role theory in particular, clearly indicates that our perceptions as to our attributes are quite close to those of the people who judge us. In fact, we all tend to develop self conception as a result of what we see in the looking glass provided by the responses of others. Since the students' perceptions as to their capacities were not developed in a vacuum, but rather in interaction with lecturers, teachers and pupils, it seems likely that, even if the reflection was a little distorted, it holds some fair resemblance to reality.

There are other good reasons for relying on the students' perceptions as to their capacities, the main one being that such perceptions will be their main guide to the adequacy of their performance once they start teaching. Even the neophyte teachers receive very little collegial assessment or supervision. They are thrust back finally to reliance on their own assessments of their capacities if they want to decide where improvements in performance should be made during their career.

Therefore, the use of student teachers' perceptions of their abilities to perform the 35 competencies as a result of their personal attributes and their learning experiences within a college program and at school during student teaching seems an appropriate method of gauging the impact of these variables on the overall professional development of prospective teachers. Moreover, this information allows some comparisons to be made between students in different programs and cultures. In addition, some insight may be gained into the relative value of three year programs compared with four year programs and consequently may provide support for those who advocate increasing the length of teacher education programs.

METHODOLOGY

Final year students enrolled in an American university and an Australian college of advanced education responded to a survey. Eighty one American students were in their final semester of a four-year Baccalaureate Degree program at a large mid-western university. The majority of these students were females who had completed one full semester of student teaching. They did not have any prior teaching contact with schools except for visits associated with demonstration lessons or other activities related to their coursework.

The Australian students were in their final semester of a three-year Diploma program at a college of advanced education in Sydney, Australia. Forty four students responded to the survey. These students were predominantly females who had been to schools for six different student teaching periods each of which was about three weeks duration. Two of these periods were completed in each year of the program. In addition, these students had extensive school visits associated with demonstration lessons and other professional activities.

The domain of the instrument used in this study was made up of 35 competency statements. These items were extracted from a teacher education needs survey (Martin and Khamis, 1980) and were divided into five groups:

1. Personal attributes - seven items
2. Knowledge about specific issues - four items
3. Catering for individual differences - seven items
4. Classroom performance - ten items
5. Organising performance - seven items

The competency statements were randomly distributed within the survey in order to minimise set response patterns and increase the reliability of the instrument.

The subjects were asked to indicate on a four point Likert scale (1 = limited extent, 4 = very great extent) their perceptions of the extent to which each of the following variables influenced their abilities to perform 35 competencies:

a) Perceptions of their abilities to perform the listed competencies due to personal attributes;

b) Perceptions of their abilities to perform the listed competencies due to overall classroom preparation at college; and

c) Perceptions of their abilities to perform the listed competencies due to their experiences associated with student teaching.

The responses of both American and Australian samples were analysed. Comparisons were made between mean responses of the two samples of students for each group of competencies. The response means for the personal attributes competencies are set out in Table 1. The range and values for the reported means indicate that the American and Australian students perceived the student teaching experience and their own personal attributes had greater influence on their perceptions of their abilities to perform the seven personal attributes competencies than their classroom preparation.

The American students' means for competencies related to personal attributes and student teaching variables were 24.0 and 24.2 respectively, while the corresponding means for the Australian students were 23.2 and 22.5. By contrast, the means for competencies related to classroom preparation were 19.8 for American students and 19.6 for Australian students. These means are much lower than the means for the other two variables. This finding reflects the nature

of teacher preparation programs. Students are expected to rely on their personal attributes and use these during student teaching. However, the theoretical nature of courses within a program generally prevent students from obtaining practical experiences associated with developing initiative, a sense of humour or enthusiasm towards their teaching duties. Such experiences are more easily provided for during student teaching.

The response means for the second group of competencies - knowledge about educational issues, are presented in Table 2. American and Australian students revealed that the student teaching experience had more influence on their knowledge about educational issues than their college programs. This was evident by the much higher means of 13.2 and 11.8 obtained for the student teaching variable for the American and Australian students respectively compared with means of 11.4 and 10.6 reported for the college program variable and 10.5 and 10.0 for the personal attributes variable.

The means reported for the American sample were generally higher indicating that the American student teaching experience and college program had more influence on their perceptions of developing knowledge about educational issues than the Australian students. The additional year at college may be a significant factor in the reported differences as well as differences which may exist in the nature of the content of courses offered in the two institutions.

The response means for the third group of competencies - catering for individual differences, are presented in Table 3. Very little difference existed between the two groups on personal attributes and class preparation responses. The reported means for these two variables for the American students were 20.0 and 19.1 respectively. While the corresponding means for the Australian students were 18.1 and 19.6. However, the American responses for student teaching were again higher, namely 24.1 compared with 21.1 for Australian responses. Marked differences were reported for competencies related to the use of relevant subject matter and catering for migrant children. The American student teaching experiences appear to emphasise the catering

for individual differences in the classroom more than the Australian experiences. Furthermore, the Australian situation focussed on teaching strategies designed for the whole class. Nevertheless, changes in the Australian situation particularly in the State of New South Wales have taken place due to the publication of a multicultural statement and special education policies appropriate for all schools.

The response means for classroom performance competencies are presented in Table 4. These data show little difference existed between the American and Australian students' perceptions of their abilities to perform the listed competencies due to the influence of the personal attributes and student teaching variables. However, the American students reported a total mean of 26.7 for the classroom performance variable. The corresponding Australian mean was 29.9 indicating a much higher perception of the influence of the classroom preparation variable, thus reflecting some benefits of the Australian program.

Very little difference existed between the two groups on their perceptions of their abilities to perform the listed competencies as a result of personal attributes. Such findings may reflect the differences existing between the two institutions. The American students were undertaking a four-year Baccalaureate Degree program which provided opportunities for improving classroom performance as well as broadening the personal education of students. By contrast, the Australian students experienced a three-year Diploma program which had greater emphasis on classroom teaching and providing a variety of experiences designed to enhance the professional development of students.

The American students' responses were slightly higher for many of the competencies except for student teaching responses which were much higher overall for all the groups of competencies. This may be associated with the time the survey was completed. The American students completed the survey at the end of the final semester when they had just finished their student teaching experience. The recency of this experience could have appeared more meaningful. By contrast,

the Australian students completed the survey at the end of their final semester several weeks after the last student teaching period, consequently the significance of many of their experiences from the previous period would not be as meaningful or perhaps retained as well.

In order to compare the responses of the American and Australian students for the three variables and the five competency groups, a multivariate analysis of variance test was performed yielding an overall F value of 3.07 which was significant at the .01 level. However, a Scheffé follow procedure revealed that no two competency groups were significantly different at the .05 level. Thus reflecting the generally higher scores for the American sample but not highlighting any statistically significant difference in the students' perceptions of their abilities to perform the groups of competencies as a result of their personal attributes, college program, or student teaching experiences.

DISCUSSION

Comparisons between American and Australian elementary student teachers' perceptions of their abilities to perform certain competencies revealed that the American students had slightly higher perceptions of their abilities than their Australian counterpart. Differences existed within the groups however. The Australian students appeared to have high perceptions of their abilities to perform competencies related to classroom performance and organisation. Any differences reported by the two groups may be due to the nature of the programs in each institution, and cultural differences existing between the two countries.

The American students experienced a semester of student teaching in the final year of a four year Baccalaureate program, consequently they are more likely to place greater value on this experience because they are able to implement many of the ideas discussed at college. Moreover, the American students have the continuing opportunity to refine their teaching skills so by the end of the student teaching period they can accept full responsibility for the class.

The Australian students experienced several short student teaching periods. In the final period students are expected to teach full time for at least one week. This may place undue pressure and thus slightly undermine their perceptions of their abilities as a result of such experience. Nevertheless, the Australian students felt that their overall perceptions of their classroom performance was higher than their American counterpart. This may be directly attributed to the nature of the college program which has strong emphasis on micro-teaching, teaching strategies, and effective teaching. Moreover, students are expected to complete this program in three years, consequently, teaching and other professional experiences are

integrated throughout the three years. By contrast, the American Degree program requires four years to complete and does not appear to have the same emphasis on early classroom teaching experience or early field experiences.

This study has compared American and Australian students' perceptions of their abilities to perform 35 competencies as a result of personal attributes, classroom preparation, and student teaching. Both groups revealed lower perceptions as a result of the college program than personal attributes and student teaching. The data highlighted the need to examine outcomes expected of teacher education programs so that graduates will have specific knowledge skills and attitudes as a result of their total teacher education preparation. In addition, little support can be found to support those who advocate increasing the length of programs. Indeed, if cultural and program differences are taken into account the data revealed that the Australian three year trained students had somewhat higher perceptions of their abilities to perform classroom competencies. This supports Williamsons' (.977) criticism of the "theoretical rhetoric" in programs and Turney (1982) who concluded that student teaching is the most powerful intervention in a teachers' professional preparation. Furthermore, the study points to the need for teacher educators to identify outcomes expected to be achieved as a result of the additional time spent in college classrooms instead of providing alternate experiences in schools in the form of inservice activities. Such experiences may achieve the same outcomes and be more meaningful to teachers.

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TABLE 1

MEANS FOR PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES COMPETENCIES
- UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIAN SAMPLES

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES/ HUMAN RELATIONS	PERS/ATT		CLASS/PREP		ST. TEACH	
	USA	AUST	USA	AUST	USA	AUST
	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$
1. Show energy and enthusiasm toward own learning as well as pupil learning.	3.6	3.4	2.7	3.0	3.5	3.0
2. Demonstrate initiative, resourcefulness and self-reliance, that is, eagerness to inquire into all aspects of the job.	3.4	3.4	2.7	2.8	3.3	3.0
3. Ask for advice on specific problems.	3.3	3.3	2.6	3.0	3.3	3.4
4. Express emotion responsively especially to convey acceptance and enthusiasm.	3.5	3.3	2.7	2.6	3.5	3.2
5. Admit weaknesses and work on them.	3.4	3.3	2.7	2.6	3.5	3.0
6. Work harmoniously as a member of a team.	3.4	3.4	2.7	2.8	3.5	3.5
7. Attempt to assess student feelings.	3.4	3.1	2.7	2.8	3.6	3.4
TOTAL MEANS:	24.0	23.2	18.8	19.6	24.2	22.5

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TABLE 2

MEANS FOR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES COMPETENCIES - UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIAN SAMPLES

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ISSUES	PERS/ATT		CLASS/PREP		ST. TEACH	
	USA	AUST	USA	AUST	USA	AUST
	$\bar{x}_1$	$\bar{x}_2$	$\bar{x}_1$	$\bar{x}_2$	$\bar{x}_1$	$\bar{x}_2$
1. Know and understand how learning experiences are related to personal development.	3.0	2.6	3.0	2.7	3.5	3.1
2. Know the educational and related social problems of the pupils.	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.6	3.5	3.1
3. Be aware of current educational issues.	2.4	2.3	2.6	2.4	3.0	2.5
4. Know the principles of behaviour modification.	2.5	2.4	3.2	2.9	3.2	3.1
TOTAL MEANS:	10.5	10.0	11.4	10.6	13.2	11.8

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TABLE 3

MEANS FOR CATERING FOR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES COMPETENCIES - UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIAN SAMPLES

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES	PERS/ATT		CLASS/PREP		ST. TEACH	
	USA	AUST	USA	AUST	USA	AUST
	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$
1. Adapt materials for different ability levels.	3.0	2.4	2.7	2.8	3.4	3.0
2. Plan to teach a group as well as plan to teach individuals.	2.9	2.7	2.8	3.1	3.4	3.3
3. Re-adjust teaching techniques and materials after examining classwork.	2.8	2.9	2.7	3.0	3.7	3.4
4. Use most relevant subject matter in lessons taught.	2.9	2.3	2.9	2.4	3.4	2.5
5. Know how to cater for migrant children.	2.3	2.0	2.1	2.1	3.5	2.2
6. Provide essential remedial work for pupils in need.	2.9	2.7	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.3
7. Involve pupils and their ideas in lessons.	3.2	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.5	3.4
TOTAL MEANS:	20.0	18.1	19.1	19.6	24.4	21.1

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TABLE 4

MEANS FOR CLASSROOM PERFORMANCE COMPETENCIES
- UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIAN SAMPLES

CLASSROOM PERFORMANCE	PERS/ATT		CLASS/PREP		ST. TEACH	
	USA	AUST	USA	AUST	USA	AUST
	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$
1. Use the higher order thinking skills of pupils in each lesson e.g. ask "why" questions.	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.5	3.3
2. Be skilled in chalkboard writing and setting out.	2.4	2.7	2.1	3.1	3.3	3.3
3. Use eye contact to respond appropriately to non-verbal pupil cues.	3.3	3.2	2.4	2.8	3.7	3.5
4. Repeat or rephrase sentences or questions not understood.	3.1	3.2	2.5	2.8	3.6	3.4
5. Teach different parts of the lesson at an appropriate pace.	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	3.5	3.4
6. Demonstrate flexibility by changing lesson steps when students are not understanding.	3.3	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.7	3.1
7. Demonstrate that the content of each lesson taught is well known.	2.9	3.0	2.9	2.9	3.3	3.4
8. Demonstrate the effective use of positioning and movement around the classroom.	3.0	3.0	2.6	3.1	3.4	3.7
9. Use appropriate examples when explaining.	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.4
10. Demonstrate ability to "teach" rather than just "tell".	3.2	2.8	2.8	2.9	3.6	3.4

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TABLE 5

MEANS FOR ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE COMPETENCIES - UNITED STATES AND AUSTRALIAN SAMPLES

ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE	PERS/ATT		CLASS/PREP		ST. TEACH	
	USA	AUST	USA	AUST	USA	AUST
	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$
1. Be punctual in dealing with school staff and duties.	3.4	3.5	2.5	2.9	3.2	3.0
2. Utilise teacher preparation time for effective planning.	3.0	3.1	2.4	3.3	3.5	3.3
3. Keep accurate school records such as attendance, marks, record cards, etc.	3.0	2.7	2.2	2.7	3.5	3.1
4. Keep continuous records of a pupil achievement to facilitate future lesson planning.	2.5	2.5	2.5	3.0	3.2	3.2
5. Use an appropriate system for marking classwork.	2.9	2.7	2.5	2.8	3.6	3.4
6. Developed detailed course or unit programs of instruction.	2.7	2.5	2.9	3.1	2.4	3.1
7. Submit reports accurately and on time.	3.2	3.1	2.9	2.9	3.2	3.1
TOTAL MEANS:	20.7	20.1	17.9	20.7	22.6	22.2

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